

The Evil Serpent

Story: The Evil Serpent

Storylink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9141707/1/>

Category: Lion King

Genre: Adventure/Romance

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Authorlink: <https://www.fanfiction.net/u/3365186/>

Last updated: 03/30/2013

Words: 13011

Rating: T

Status: Complete

Content: Chapter 1 to 7 of 7 chapters

Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: Simba and his friends are subjected to the worst form of temptation...

Chapter 1: Chapter 1: The Temptation of Waoga

AN: Well, I managed to survive the onslaught of fan anguish from killing Tojo yesterday. But that's the way the story goes, sadly. It can't be happy all the time. Still, this next story should be a little interesting. I hope you enjoy it without feeling too mad at me.

Chapter One: The Temptation of Waoga

Waoga was fearful.

Not for herself. No, she could take care of herself just fine, thank you very much. But she was fearful for her cub: Tuhuma. He had been missing for days now. She had no idea why. One day he had left the pride with his best friend, Mjanja, and never returned home. No one in the pride had seen him since. They didn't know where he went, or what he was planning on doing. It was as if he had vanished off the face of the earth.

It had left Waoga heartbroken. Tuhuma was her only cub. Ever since his father had died, she had taken it upon herself to raise him to the very best of her ability. Her cub was the thing that mattered to her the most. If anything had happened to him, then she would never forgive herself. She wouldn't be able to live knowing that he was dead because of her. It meant that she had failed to protect him. Failed as a parent. Failed to provide love.

And that was the most heartbreaking thing of all.

She wouldn't stop until she found him, dead or alive. She had practically scoured the jungle on her own, covering miles and miles of land. But there was no sign of her cub—or his best friend, for that matter. Waoga was willing to bet that Mjanja's own parents were worried sick and searching frantically for her... She felt so sorry for them. Losing a child was one of the hardest things in the world to cope with. It was the one thing that all parents—whoever they were—feared the most.

"Tuhuma!" Waoga yelled, her calls echoing into the deep recesses of the packed—and yet strangely quiet—jungle. Her voice had grown hoarse from yelling her cub's name so many times. Her throat felt clogged up, and she found it hard to breathe. But she kept on going. There would be no rest until she had found her child. "Tuhuma!"

No answer. There had been no answer for days, but this failed to deter her. Her eyes flickered briefly, as fatigue crept into her bones. Her eyes were bloodshot and weary-looking. And yet she didn't sleep. Not even when she had felt so exhausted that she might pass out. "Tuhuma! Where are you?"

You must find him, she told herself, determined. *You must find him*.

She had ignored the warnings of the other members in the pride to journey out in a search team to find the two cubs. "It's too dangerous," they said. "You don't know what's out there," they warned her. She just ignored them. She could handle things by herself—especially when it concerned her cub. Right now, there were no maniacs or murderers that would dare mess with her.

They stressed the dangers, though. How could she ever forget them? Predators and wizards and psychopathic lions who liked to shout the same phrase over and over again while screeching like an eagle. There were all sorts of rumours and outlandish stories floating around the pride. Especially about the Pride Lands. Oh, it just *irritated* Waoga to speak about the Pride Lands. She was so sick of hearing about them that it made her want to tear her fur out.

It seemed that was all everyone wanted to talk about. "They must have committed a very wrong act," they theorised. "The Great Kings of the Past must have decided it was their time to go."

Waoga scoffed at the thought. *Great Kings of the Past indeed*, she thought in disdain. She didn't believe in any such thing. There were no Great Kings of the Past watching over everyone. No heavenly gods in the sky. As far as she was concerned, you were all on your own in this big scary world. You had to fight to protect yourself and your family.

She glanced up at the late evening sky, frowning. The stars were beginning to twinkle, shining brightly in the blank expanse of space. *Nothing going on up there affects anything down here*, she thought. The idea that the Great Kings of the Past were there to guide them seemed very stupid to her. How could anyone be so thoughtless to put all their hope in a ludicrous religious belief? In her opinion, it just demonstrated a high level of ineptitude.

Waoga stopped for a moment, feeling the eerie atmosphere of the jungle weighing down on her. She couldn't hear anything, which was odd for this time of night. No crickets chirping on the ground. No birds nesting in the trees. Nothing. The jungle seemed utterly lifeless.

"Oh, Tuhuma," she sighed, resting her somnolent head against the rough trunk of a tree. "Where did you go?"

Was it something I did? she wondered. Tuhuma had always been such a logical and intelligent cub. That was just what she wanted him to be. Someone who would question things and wish to learn more about the world around them. Not a fool. She'd met many animals like that in her life—including some of the lionesses in her pride. Brought up with no idea of education whatsoever. It was a very dim way for one to live their life.

But Tuhuma and her never argued. Not really. They had such a lovely relationship with each other. The kind of relationship any mother would want to have with their child. One full of communication and kindness and... Well, that was more than enough for her.

Unless there was something going on with Tuhuma that she didn't know about. She knew that he was often bullied by the other cubs for the way he was—far too intelligent, for their liking—and that his only real friend was Mjanja. Maybe that was why they had both disappeared. To escape the oppression. She felt her claws curl at the thought of what she would do to those cubs if that was the reason for their disappearance...

"I'd do anything to have you back," she whispered to herself, feeling far too tired to move now. She knew that she was just succumbing to sheer hope now, rather than determination. Maybe her cub would find her, instead of the other way around. It wasn't entirely impossible. "Anything..."

"Did sssomeone sssay... *anything*?"

Waoga's senses were at full alert upon hearing the voice. It was a slow, sinister, slithery voice. One that you couldn't trust at all.

Waoga slowly looked up—

—and came face to face with a serpent.

It was a python. Coiled around a branch above her, his face mere inches away from hers. His dark eyes looked as black as coal. "Hello there, little lionesssss..."

Waoga knew a little about snakes. When she was younger, an old teacher of hers—a hornbill called Pori—had spoken of them. They were the type of creatures you could never trust. They were always up to something. A sneaky plan that would most likely end up with them consuming you for dinner.

"I have no interest in you." She turned away from him. This snake wouldn't get the satisfaction of messing with her head. It was quite a favourite pastime of their kind. "Now, get out of here."

"Oh, how brave," said the snake slimily, inching towards her ever so slowly. "A mother who losesss their child is *a/waysss* brave."

Waoga couldn't help but retaliate. The serpent had hit a raw nerve. "What do you know about my child?"

The snake pretended to look as though he knew nothing. "I know very little, Waoga. After all, I'm only a ssslithering sssnake..."

"How do you know my name?" Waoga demanded, suddenly burning with anger. Maybe *he* was the one who had taken her child! "Where have you put my cub? I know you've taken him."

"Me? Not likely," said the serpent. "But I have... the gift. I can read mindsss... Ssssee inside the livessss of otherssss. You are scared. Alone. Afraid that your cub has perished. Well, I can tell you the truth." He leaned in extra close, hissing in her ear. "He *hassss*."

Waoga gasped, eyes widening. Her cub was... dead? "No," she said, not even wanting to look at the snake. "He hasn't. You're lying. I'll find him eventually. I know I will."

The snake chuckled to himself. "You can convince yourself all you want," he told her, "but I know that the truth will niggle away. Right at the bottom of your sssssoul."

"What do you want from me?" Waoga asked. He had to be up to something. If not, then he probably would have tried to swallow her by now. She knew how these snakes liked a big meal...

"I wish to offer you..." The snake paused for a moment. "Temptation."

"T-temptation?" Waoga stammered. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." The serpent raised himself up to a nearby tree branch, plucking a bright red apple from the end of it. He dropped it from his mouth, sending it rolling across the ground until it came to a halt at Waoga's feet. She stared down at it, curious.

"If I were to offer you thissss apple," said the snake, "would you be inclined to consume it?"

"No," said Waoga, without hesitation. "Not from you."

The serpent chuckled. "Well... if I were to offer you thissss apple," he continued, "with the added consequence that it would restore your son, would you be inclined to consume it *then*?"

Waoga glanced at the apple, and then up at the mysterious snake. "Why are you offering me this?"

"I never sssaid anything about an offer," said the serpent. "I sssimply asked you a question."

Waoga thought for a moment. "So you're saying that if I eat this apple," she asked, "then it will bring back my son?"

"Hypothetically," said the snake. "If that issss what you truly desire. You did sssay that you would do anything to bring him back."

"Yes," Waoga admitted, bowing her head in quiet shame. She wasn't going to lie. "I did."

"Then go on," the serpent urged, grinning at her, revealing long, sharp fangs. "You know you want to. Eat thissss apple and restore your ssson. The temptation is impossible to resist, hmm?"

Waoga kept her eyes trained on the snake as she bent down to pick up the apple. It was the purest apple she had ever laid eyes on. But then that could easily be a trap. It could be filled with poison, for instance. As soon as she took a bite, she might plunge to the ground, dead. But then this snake didn't look like an evil witch...

"It's a trap," Waoga said, releasing the apple to the ground. "I won't do it."

"Very well," said the snake, sounding as though he did not care. "If that is what you desire. But remember... you will never have the opportunity to bring your ssson back ever again." He frowned. "How... ssssad."

Do it, Waoga told herself. This was the tempted side of her. The side that was slowly beginning to see the bright side of the serpent's offer. You will search this jungle for years and never find him. You heard the snake: he is gone for ever. Eat the apple.

But what if it's a trap? she asked herself.

Who cares? came the reply. *You have nothing else to live for. Your son was your life.*

Waoga looked heartbroken at the thought. *You're right*, she admitted, feeling suddenly empty. *You're right...*

Waoga grabbed for the apple again, and without thinking, took a big bite out of it. She swallowed the mouthful, surprisingly enjoying the taste. After all, she hadn't eaten in days.

"It doesn't taste very fatal," she said.

"Hey—do I look like the kind of ssssnake that would do that to ssssomeone like you?" the snake asked.

Waoga began to shake her head—

—and then fell to the ground, dead.

"Yessssss!"

The snake smiled evilly, staring with eager eyes at Waoga's dead body. He then looked at the apple, as if expecting something to happen. He counted away the seconds.

One...

Two...

Three...

But nothing occurred. The jungle remained silent and eerie.

The serpent frowned. "No... *No!*"

For now, the evil plan of the serpent called Nyoka had failed.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2: The Real Monsters**

Chapter Two: The Real Monsters

Tojo was dead.

Those three words seemed to sour the atmosphere whenever they were spoken. Especially if you happened to live in Jowai Resort. The mood had been so tense since his death that it felt like a big fight was going to break out at any moment. Simba, Nala and Haiba had been on tenterhooks ever since Tojo had died. They didn't really want to say anything that might upset or worsen the situation.

Particularly for Tama.

Tama and Tojo had been a happy couple for many, many months. It was hard for Simba and Nala to even imagine that they had once been in the position of master and servant. Tama had bossed him around for so long—and yet he still loved her. It was incredible. Somewhat sweet, even.

But now he was dead, and there was nothing they could do about it. They could have shouted and screamed at the heavens, cursing the wretched animal who had killed him.

But then it was Tama herself who had done the deed.

The others didn't know why. There could be hundreds upon thousands of reasons why Tama had decided to murder the only cub she had ever loved. They would never know until they asked. But then they were terrified of how she might react. Tama didn't seem like the type of cub who would take death in the best way. The grief had to be absolutely devastating for her. She might not recover ever again...

Yet they knew they would have to confront her, at some point. The more information they had, the better.

"You do it," Simba said.

"No—you do it," Nala retorted.

"*Both* of you do it," Haiba cut in.

"Look, maybe we should *all* do it," Nala suggested. "Tama hasn't moved from the same spot in about a day. She just keeps... lying there. Staring straight ahead. It's like she's just died."

"Or someone very close to her has died," Simba added, giving her a stern look. "I don't know why we're acting so afraid of her. Everyone deals with grief in different ways. Maybe her way is to simply do nothing."

He knew all about grief, having lost his own parents in a tragedy that seemed so long ago... A part of him had died with them. It was one of those things that you never really recovered from properly.

"That's a fair point, I suppose," Haiba agreed. "Although I don't see how we're going to talk to her. She might not even answer."

"Then there's nothing to be afraid of," Nala replied, pushing them both forwards. They could see a vine hammock stretched between two distant trees. Lying in it was a heap of miserable fur known as Tama. She was facing away from them, never moving from the same spot. Not since they had first put her there the day before. "Come on. We have to ask her."

The three cubs eventually reached Tama, looking her over. Her fur was matted with dry blood and tear stains. Whatever had happened between her and Tojo, it had sure led to quite a grisly mess...

"Um..." Simba cleared his throat, feeling quite awkward. "Tama?"

She didn't answer. Just shuffled ever so slightly in the hammock, indicating that she was at least awake.

"Tama," Nala said softly, moving quietly towards her. "We'd, um, like to... talk to you. Only for a couple of minutes."

Tama said nothing. The silence felt incredibly uncomfortable for all of them. They were all thinking the same thing: *Tojo. Tojo. Tojo.* The same name. Over and over again. It was haunting them. Like a curse. It hurt them just to think about him.

"Tama?" Simba said, hoping that he would get some kind of response. If not, then they would give up and have to try

again tomorrow...

"What do you want?" Tama grumbled, still clearly showing that she was in no mood to speak with them. Her voice sounded broken up. She was destroyed.

"Tama... we need to know," Nala told her, trying to be as delicate as possible. "What happened out there?"

Tama rolled over to face them, alarming them somewhat. She looked terrible. Her eyes were red from crying billions of tears, and they had a totally lifeless look to them. As if she had lost all meaning.

"I killed him," Tama said. "*That's* what happened."

"But *why*?" Simba asked.

Tama lay back in the hammock, staring up at the trees above her. "I had to," she told them. "There was nothing left of him. And I'd be damned if I was going to let someone else invade his body. It belongs to him, and him only."

The three cubs all looked at each other, bemused. There was one other question on their minds that they wanted to know the answer to.

But it seemed that Tama was psychic, so she answered it before they could open their mouths again. "I couldn't do it," she said. "I couldn't kill myself. I couldn't do it because I was too much of a... a *coward*. I'm different from what I was the last time. I... I wasn't as brave as he was. And I never will be."

Haiba scratched the back of his neck, sucking air in through his teeth. "Uh, Tama, I know this may sound a little rude, but... couldn't you use your magic to bring him back?"

Simba and Nala glared at Haiba, stunned that he would ask Tama such a thing. She was going to kill him for that. She would—

Tama chuckled. "Oh, how I wish," she said. "But there's nothing to bring back. That *thing* took his soul and invaded it. Tojo is gone for good. Like he never existed. I can't bring someone back if they don't have a soul." She sniffled, wiping tears from her eyes with a paw.

"Uh... one more thing," Simba said, knowing that he was trying his luck now. "We were kinda wondering if you knew of any *wizards* hanging around in the area. Ones who won't try to kill us and—"

"I get it," Tama interrupted, still smiling. It scared them, ever so slightly. "That's why you came here. Not to say sorry, or to help. Just to use me. Makes perfect sense, I guess."

Nala shook her head. "Tama, we would never—"

"Look, if you want a wizard, then travel in the direction of my old pride," Tama said, pointing out the right way with a claw. "Most of them are scattered around that area—and they're magical, too."

Simba studied her with curiosity. "If you know we're using you," he asked, "then why are you telling us what we need?"

Tama stared into his auburn eyes. The smile still didn't leave her face. "Because I know you," she told them. "I know what you are. What *all* of you are. If I refused to help you—if I fought back—then I know what would happen. You would find me—and then you would finish me off. Just like Tojo. So I'll help you defeat the monsters."

She looked down, shaking her head.

"But then we know who the real monsters are around here, don't we?"

"She's lost it," Haiba said, as they sat by the riverside. "Completely cuckoo. The death's harder on her than we thought."

"Not really," Simba replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if she blamed us for it. You'll blame anyone when someone dies—even your closest friends."

"So should we try it, then?" Nala asked. "Should we go where she told us to?"

"I suppose we'll have to," Simba said, climbing to his paws. "We don't exactly have any other leads."

"This is so glum," Haiba sighed, resting his head against his forepaws. "It's like when I organised my own surprise

party. No one turned up. Well, not even me. I wasn't supposed to know about it."

"Do you think she'll be all right?" Nala asked, gesturing in Tama's direction. "In the end?"

"No," Simba replied honestly, looking like he was thinking very hard about something. "Not really. But that's our lives. No one's ever going to come to help us. We have to figure everything out for ourselves. Kill or be killed."

"I'm beginning to hate that phrase with each day," Haiba mumbled, as he walked away. "Come on, then. Let's go and find some magical lions."

Nala followed him, looking pretty distressed. "Why do I get the feeling this day is going to end in tears?" Everyone seemed so miserable—even Haiba. And if Haiba was miserable, then you just *knew* your day wasn't going well.

Simba stood there for a few moments, lost in his own thoughts. *Maybe she's right*, he thought. *Maybe we are the real monsters...*

"Simba!" Nala was calling him as they left the resort. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah," Simba replied, padding after them. "I'm coming."

From in the shadows, a snake was coiled around a tree, watching them. "How sssuper..." Nyoka hissed, smiling evilly. "More ssssouls to tempt."

And then he was gone, before anyone knew he was even there.

AN: Oh, dear. A slithery snake with apples of temptation. Lots of religious themes going on here... Purely coincidental, you understand. And I love Tama's little speech about the cubs being the real monsters. That's quite a dark perspective... Do you agree? I'd be delighted to hear some theories. Anyhow, I'll see you tomorrow.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: The Vision

AN: Interesting theories about our new little snake villain, Nyoka. Lots of biblical references, eh? Well, I couldn't resist. I love evil snakes. And I'm sure you'll love these next two chapters. There'll be a nice treat for Tama and Tojo fans.

Haradion: Oh, souls can perish quite easily in this series. Look what happened to Mufasa and Sarabi. I think you'll find that Tojo is dead as a dodo.

Guest: Simba and Nala have become quite selfish. They're not as noble as they used to be.

Chapter Three: The Vision

Tama rolled around in the hammock, feeling nothing but the worst of agony. A big empty space had replaced her heart. A worthless void that would only swallow her up when she could take it no more. Her thoughts hadn't changed from the previous day. There was only one thing she could think about.

Tojo.

Just the thought of his name—his former existence—was enough to make her the most miserable cub on earth. Her love—her *only* love—was gone. And nothing would ever fix that. Not even her magic. His soul had ceased to exist. She had heard it fading away into nothingness. His final words still echoed into her mind:

"Tama... I love you."

And then he had died. Just like that. She never even had the chance to say goodbye. To hold him and comfort him in his final moments. No. Life was cruel like that. It had taken him without warning. When she woke up that morning, she thought everything was going to be fine. An ordinary day, just like any other they had in the jungle. Peaceful and happy.

But everything went so horribly wrong.

Tojo had used Hago's staff to consume his power. And consume him it did. He turned into a monster, torturing Tama for her 'crimes' against him. Of course, neither of them knew that this was all part of Hago's plan to return to full health. Things became even more complicated when it was revealed that the staff had a mind of its own. It was going to use Tojo as a host to take on a physical existence, before enslaving the world, bringing mass death and destruction.

Tama knew she had to do the only thing she could—and stabbed Tojo right through the chest with the staff. He was dead within moments. It saddened her even more to know that she had killed her own boyfriend. She kept trying to convince herself otherwise.

It wasn't Tojo. It was something inside of him. He wasn't even there. His soul was destroyed.

Hundreds and thousands of excuses. Anything to deviate from the truth. She felt guilty. She felt like she was responsible—even though that couldn't be further from the truth. She really did love Tojo, and he really loved her. But—as was commonplace in this world—something always managed to come between them.

Maybe if you weren't so horrible to him then he would still be here, Tama thought, remembering how she had used him as a slave. She could only imagine how badly she had hurt his feelings during those times. She was a bully. A mean-spirited and vicious bully. *Maybe things would have taken a different path if you were a good friend to him. Instead you tortured him. You're horrible. You're worthless. You're pathetic.*

And yet, no matter how many times she admonished herself, it failed to make her feel any better. Instead, it just made her feel worse. The only emotion that existed for her now was sadness. Endless sadness.

Tama closed her eyes, wanting to go back to sleep. Or die. Either way, she didn't mind. But she was too much of a coward to kill herself now. Although if someone else was offering to do it, then she wouldn't raise any objections...

Tama blinked a few times. Her eyes felt itchy and sore from crying so much. Since yesterday, she had run out of tears to weep. All she could do now was stare straight ahead, lying in the same position, thinking about how her life had taken such a dark turn. She didn't believe in the idea of the Great Kings of the Past dictating what happened in one's life. God or no god, she would have killed them if they decided who should die when and where...

Suddenly feeling quite sleepy, Tama turned her head to the side—

—and Tojo stared back at her.

Tama smiled faintly. She knew that it was just a hallucination; it was only her delirium making her believe that he was there. Whether or not she was insane, she didn't care. At least she could see him.

"Oh, Tojo..." Tama stared at him longingly. "It's so hard."

"You know you have to keep going, Tama," Tojo told her softly. Just to hear his voice again made her happy in a way she couldn't describe. It didn't matter whether this was just a dream or her wild, crazy imagination. It was still him. "You can't just give up."

"But I want to," Tama moaned, suppressing a sob. "I want to die... I want to die... Please. Tell me what to do."

"You know I can't tell you to kill yourself," Tojo said, and she knew that was he was speaking the truth. Tojo was the one who had saved her, on that fateful day where she almost took her own life. When she realised that she was nothing but an evil monster. He was the only one who could convince her otherwise. That was when they confessed their love for each other. It was a happy—and also very depressing—memory.

"Tama," Tojo began, in that kind—and incredibly feminine—voice of his. "I rescued you, all those months ago. I stopped you from ending your own life. All that hard work to return you to a good animal—and you want to waste it by destroying yourself?"

"But I miss you," Tama said, reaching out with a paw to stroke his cheek. "I want to be with you again. We can be together. For ever..."

Tojo just stared at her. "If you kill yourself, then you will experience darkness for all eternity."

Tama absorbed Tojo's reply, thinking it over. She knew what happened to every evil animal when they died. They received no heaven, no glory—just darkness for ever and ever. It was the sort of thing that would drive anyone insane. The thought of eternal loneliness was what chilled Tama the most. No one to help you...

Just the darkness.

"Why?" Tama asked. "Why do I have to suffer like this?"

"This is life, Tama," Tojo replied simply. "You can't predict it. There are deaths. Every single day. And you don't expect it. That's the thing with death. You feel like you're never going to be able to continue without your loved one there—and yet you do. You adapt. Don't worry about me, Tama. I'm happy. You need to learn to continue on with your life, instead of thinking about me."

"But I killed you," Tama sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I just—"

"I don't blame you, Tama," Tojo interrupted gently. "You did what you had to do. It was the right thing."

"My heart is broken," Tama told him. "I can't live without you, Tojo. I have no reason to live."

"Yes, you do," Tojo said. "Don't dwell on the past. Continue onwards, in my memory. That is the only way you'll ever be happy again."

Tama frowned, thinking of how difficult it would be to move forwards in her life without Tojo. She was the only cub she trusted. Certainly not Simba and the others. They were the real monsters. She knew so. Everywhere they went, they brought death and destruction with them. She even thought that Tojo might have been alive had they not interfered on that fateful day...

"Don't blame them, either," Tojo said, as if able to read her thoughts. "It's not Simba, Nala and Haiba's fault that I died. They're good animals. They've helped us thousands of times over. You would be a fool not to reciprocate their friendship. Why continue alone when you can have friends by your side?"

"But you were my *best* friend," Tama stressed. "I love you."

"And I love you, too," Tojo said. "But I want you to move on, Tama. Please. At least try to make things better. I know you. You're incredible. You could save the whole world if you wanted to. I'm proud of you, and everything that you've done."

Tama's smile brightened. "Thank you."

"Oh, and one more thing," Tojo said, a sad smile on his face. "Don't forget me."

And then he was gone.

Tama felt emotionally strengthened by that hallucination. Even though she was crazy, it had helped. Maybe she would try to move on, in Tojo's memory. Perhaps she could try to make things better for others. She knew that was what Tojo would have wanted her to do.

"Oh, Tojo," Tama said, shaking her head. "No one is *ever* going to forget you."

Slowly, but surely, Tama rose from the vine hammock. She looked around carefully, before dropping onto the ground. She walked off into the empty resort, heading straight for the river. The only sound that could be heard was the quiet flow of the water.

Tama slowly lowered herself into the river, and began to scrub away the tears and bloodstains. She was getting rid of the bad memories, and replacing them with happy ones.

This signalled the start of a new life.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4: Death and Destruction**

Chapter Four: Death and Destruction

"These journeys are beginning to take their toll on me," Haiba sighed.

His body was aching all over, and he put that down to the fact that he never stopped. Not these days. It seemed that every day was another adventure. There was always an excuse to run, or hide, or fight. Always a villain. Always a danger. Always a tragedy. It was not only exhausting, but also disheartening. Were their lives ever going to get any better? "I feel like a very tired lion cub."

"You *are* a very tired lion cub," Nala retorted, sympathising with him. She too felt quite fatigued. The constant adventures that plagued them every single day was beginning to affect her health. She wasn't sleeping nearly as much as she used to. She longed for the good old days. They would have an adventure in the day, and then a nice long sleep back in the den at Pride Rock...

Not any more, though. Now it seemed that trouble could crop up at any time of day. Danger was lurking around every corner. Right now, for example, Nala was looking at a tree. It looked just like any other normal tree. But was it? There was no way of telling. It could be a living, breathing monster tree determined to swallow them whole. It was very unlikely, but these days the cubs knew that just about anything could happen to them...

"Come on, guys," Simba said, looking unusually miserable for this time of day. Nala hoped that he wasn't returning back to his grieving days. It was only a short while ago that he had decided to change his ways and act more fairly towards them. "We have to keep going if we're going to find a wizard. Then maybe things might become a little clearer."

"Well, it's not very clear right now," Haiba said. "I haven't felt this confused since I dated those identical twins. Every time I tried to kiss one, the other one would feel it. Even if they were miles away from each other. It was really weird."

Simba felt rather distant from the others today. This was owing to the fact that he was totally immersed in his thoughts. Thinking about what Tama had said. What she had called them...

"But then we know who the real monsters are around here, don't we?"

Her words echoed over and over again in his head. He couldn't ignore them. It was probably just a fleeting thing she said in her grief—but it struck a chord with Simba. It was one of those things that the mind picked up and thrust into your brain, leaving you to think about it for hours and hours.

Are we monsters?

He asked himself the same question, over and over again. Normally, Simba and the others would have considered themselves the ones who *stopped* all the monsters and villains and creeps that decided to try and kill them. But Simba was beginning to think that maybe Tama had a point. They hadn't exactly been the most noble of cubs in recent times. In fact, they kept getting less noble with each passing day.

"Kill or be killed."

That was what Sarafina had told them all. They were on their own ever since the Pride Lands had been destroyed. They had to fight—they even had to *kill*—if they stood any chance of survival out here in the jungle. Things were different from what they once were. It wasn't as simple as stopping the bad guys and returning safely to the Pride Lands. Nowadays, it was *kill* the bad guys and sleep with one eye open to stop any predators from attacking. There was very little room for error.

But that wasn't what bothered Simba. He could adapt to this deadly place with very few problems. It was the way that they had been acting recently which worried him. It seemed that they were becoming worse. Maybe even slightly evil.

Everywhere we go, we bring death and destruction.

He wasn't wrong. He kept seeing the faces of every single animal that had died around them. Everywhere they went, misery followed them. Animals died. Families were torn apart. Friends were broken up. Simba had lost count of how many losses they had caused...

They were magnets for trouble. Both friends and enemies had died as a result of their 'adventures'. 'Tragedies' was a more appropriate word, in all honesty. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had an adventure that they'd actually *enjoyed*... That was the thing with Simba. When he was younger, he hungered for adventure and excitement. He got a

thrill out of the danger and psychotic villains that they used to encounter.

Things had gotten much more serious now, though. The villains who they encountered were vicious monsters who would take great pleasure in tearing their throats out. Just the thought of Shocker and what he would have done to them made him shiver with fear...

It's all just coincidence, Simba tried to assure himself. You're not out to cause trouble. You try to help other animals. You try to save them from the bad guys. That's the point. Isn't it?

He wasn't so sure. Not only did everything seem to crumble all around them, but they were also extremely selfish. Simba wasn't going to lie that nowadays he was mainly looking out for his own interests. All he wanted was his home back. And he would do anything to get it. Even if that meant using others—like Tama. She had the knowhow, so he would exploit that for his own purposes. That purpose being to find a wizard. And once he *did* find a wizard, he would exploit them to get even more information. It was quite a dark way of going about things... but Simba knew that this was necessary. He had to do it. He had to take control. He had to be the leader.

He had to survive.

"It's a very sad day, isn't it?" Zazu asked, perched on top of a tree, watching the river below him. He could see Tama stood in the water, slowly bathing herself in a soothing way. It was as though she was trying to wash her grief away. "Poor child."

"Zazu, I wish you would stop spying on people," Sarafina said, staring at him disapprovingly. "Why can't you just leave that poor cub alone?"

"I was merely sympathising with her," Zazu replied, fluttering down so she landed on the lioness' back. "Did I not tell you previously that I suffered quite a grave loss of my own quite recently?"

"I know you did," Sarafina agreed, "but that gives you no right to watch the sadness of others."

"Then what were you doing around here?" Zazu asked, folding his wings.

"Oh, um... I... nothing," Sarafina stammered, suddenly looking quite sheepish.

"I knew it," Zazu said, shaking his head. "Very disappointing, Sarafina. You of anyone should know to respect other animals. I respected you by knocking you out when that crazy lion was inside of you."

"You hit me on the head with a rock," Sarafina said, rubbing the top of her head. "There's still a nasty bruise there, too..."

"So?" Zazu shot back. "You were about to kill yourself. There was simply no other option but to render you unconscious."

Sarafina just sighed at him. "Whatever. I'm going to go take a walk for a while. Would you like to come?"

"No, thank you," Zazu replied. "I was thinking of trying to find a better tree to sleep in. One that won't be disturbed by a lioness such as yourself."

"Suit yourself," Sarafina said, before turning and walking away. Zazu flew off into the sky, disappearing from her line of sight.

Sarafina continued onwards into the resort. It was a surprisingly cloudy day, so the sun wasn't exactly shining in all of its usual glory. She shivered. It was quite windy, too. The weather seemed so odd these past few days. Just what was going on? It was supposed to be the middle of summer!

"Lionesssss," a voice suddenly hissed.

"Hmm?" Sarafina looked around upon hearing the voice. "Who's there? Zazu, is that you? Are you playing a trick on me?"

"Not at all," the slithery voice replied. "I was jusst hoping to speak with you."

Sarafina tilted her head to the left as a python slithered down from a nearby tree. Had he been there all this time, waiting for her? "Who are you? I don't trust snakes. I know how sneaky your kind are."

"I think you'll find I'm quite... *different* from the ressst of my kind," Nyoka replied. "Much more... *generoussss*."

"What are you doing around these parts?" Sarafina questioned, wanting know this snake's hidden agenda. She knew he

was up to something...

"Me? I was jusssst looking to help ssssomeone," Nyoka told her. "What isssss it that you desssire the mosssst, Sssarafina?"

"How do you know my name?" Sarafina demanded. That settled it for her. This snake was nothing but trouble. He obviously had some sort of psychic powers and was able to see into her thoughts...

"I know everything about you," Nyoka said, "and what you desssire."

"And what is that?" Sarafina asked.

"Power."

AN: That sneaky snake is up to something. I really like Nyoko. What a crafty villain. Now, what is he going to tempt Sarafina with? Power? But what kind of power? That is the question. Maybe things will become a little clearer with the next couple of chapters.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5: Sarafina's Desire

AN: Looks like that sinister serpent has slithered his way down to Sarafina. Will she give in to temptation? Let's find out.

MarkPol: I sense that more speculation will generate about the ending as we get closer and closer to it. I won't say whether it will be happy or sad.

Caleb123: If you find the stories dull, then why are you still reading them? I knew they would get dull eventually, so that's why I'm stopping at the end of this series.

Chapter Five: Sarafina's Desire

"Power?" Sarafina repeated, bemused. "I don't want power."

"Oh, but you *do*, Sssarafina," Nyoka hissed. "I have the gift. I know exactly what you need. I know what *everybody* needssss. Everybody needsss *power*, in sssome shape or form."

"Then what power do I need?" Sarafina asked, having already made her mind up. She didn't trust this slithery serpent at all. Not one bit. She knew that he would try to tempt her with something. Something that she really, really wanted. Something that she never told anyone. But she wouldn't give in. Never in a million years.

"You need the power of *knowledge*," Nyoka said, smiling innocently. It was almost as though he was trying to be friendly towards her. But this snake was no friend. He wanted to kill her. She was sure of that. This was all a big—and somewhat confusing—trap. "You want to know everything, Sssarafina. Admit it. About your passst. About your mate. About your *life*. Isss that not the truth?"

Sarafina could only stare back at the serpent, stunned. How could he possibly know that she wanted—more than anything else in the world, actually—to know the truth about her past? It was the single biggest mystery of her life. She knew that it had to be something horrible. Something so bad that her mind had just blocked it out. But she had to know the truth. She had to.

"I... I don't believe you," Sarafina said, obviously coming across as a liar. "You're lying."

The snake tossed his head back and let out a hideous chuckle. It chilled her blood. "It isss *you* who are lying, Sssarafina," Nyoka said. "Only the truth shall sssset you free. Will you not be pleasssed to learn it?"

"I don't care about the truth," Sarafina said. "You can't do anything. And even if you *could*, then I wouldn't give in. This is all some elaborate trick you've planned out."

"I'm just a little ssssnake trying to make hisss way in the world," Nyoka told her, looking wholeheartedly innocent. "I only wisssh to help you."

"Go on, then," Sarafina said, curious to see how this snake would try to tempt her. "What's your offer?"

"Ssso glad you assssked," the snake hissed, reaching up to a nearby tree branch and plucking a bright red apple from it with his teeth. "Take a look at thissss apple." He tossed it towards her.

Sarafina examined the apple, as it slowly rolled across the ground. She looked confusedly up at the tree. *That apple wasn't there before*, she thought. *Apples can't even grow from this tree to begin with!*

"So what?" Sarafina said, feigning disinterest. "It looks just like any other apple. It means nothing to me. I don't even like apples."

"Oh, but you'll like thisss one," Nyoka told her in his slimy voice. "It'ssss a very... *special* apple. One that can grant all of your wissshes..."

Sarafina stared at the apple. Did it just... *glow* slightly? No. It couldn't have. Apples were in no way magical. This serpent, on the other hand, was a totally different story... She wouldn't be surprised if he was a sorcerer, or wizard, or any other number of magical animals that roamed the earth.

"Ssssimply eat the apple, and you will have all the knowledge in the world," said the snake. "You will know everything about everyone. Isn't that what a lionessss such as yourssself hungers for the mossst?"

"No," Sarafina said, turning away from the snake. "I want you to leave. I don't care about your stupid temptation."

"No one can resssist temptation, Sssarafina," Nyoka stated. "Not even you."

"No." Sarafina was adamant that she would not eat that apple. It could only lead to something horrible and grisly—such as her death. Offers like this were too good to be true. This was a shady snake. Not as simple as finding a friendly genie that would grant all of your wishes. "I won't do it."

"Oh, but you *will*," Nyoka told her, staring into her eyes. "You cannot resssist."

His eyes seemed to be glowing. Sarafina could only stare into them, completely transfixed.

"You will digessst the apple," Nyoka commanded.

"Yes..." Sarafina obeyed, slowly picking up the apple. "I will eat the apple."

"And you will ssssubmit to me," Nyoka ordered.

"Ssssubmit," Sarafina said, for some odd reason sounding like the serpent. "Ssssubmit..."

She raised the apple to her mouth, ready to eat it. She opened her jaws, as the apple got closer.

Closer... closer... closer...

Bam!

Sarafina was suddenly attacked from the side, sending her tumbling onto the ground. The shiny red apple bounced across the ground, disappearing into a nearby bush. She shook her head, her senses slowly returning to her. "What... what happened?"

"Y-you!" The cub who had pushed Sarafina was pointing at Nyoka with a shaky claw.

It was Ugaidi.

"The evil serpent!" Ugaidi yelled, his eyes as wide as they usually were. After all, the cub seemed to be terrified of everything. But then that was only because of the horrid torture he had been subjected to. "The tempter! The one who will bring the end of everything!"

"Sssstay out of the way, cub," Nyoka hissed, baring his fangs threateningly at him. "Or you will be *very* sssorry..."

"Do not give into his temptation!" Ugaidi yelled, suddenly grabbing Sarafina by the cheeks. "He will kill you with his weapons of mass destruction!"

"What?" Sarafina pushed Ugaidi away, shaking her head. "It was just an apple. It can't be *that* bad."

"She will eat that apple!" Nyoka proclaimed. "And ssseal the doom of this jungle!"

"What are you up to?" Sarafina asked, more than suspicious of him by now. "What do you want?"

"What do you think I want?" Nyoka retorted. "I want thissss jungle!"

"But why?" Sarafina asked. "It's not like anyone's bothering you. It's quite the opposite, actually."

"You do not underssstand," Nyoka said. "All of you are ingrattesss. You know nothing of the bigger picture."

"And what *is* the bigger picture?" Sarafina question, raising an eyebrow.

The sinister snake just smiled. "There issss no way I am telling you," he told her. "Now, if you'll excussse me, I have more soulsss to tempt. Eventually, I'll find the *right* one..." With that, the snake slithered away, before Sarafina had a chance to react.

"Stop! Come back!" Sarafina cried, but it was useless. "Oh, no. I have to... I have to find the kids." She quickly hurried off. Something rotten was going on in the jungle. Especially when there was a hypnotic, tempting snake involved.

"Ugaidi!" Sarafina called, turning to where he was. "Are you coming?"

But he was gone.

Whoosh!

"Did you hear something?" Simba stopped upon hearing the noise. It was quiet, but audible enough for him to detect it. "It sounded like... someone moving."

Nala and Haiba turned around to face him, having been leading the way for quite some time. Unusually, Simba didn't seem too happy to lead them today. Nala deduced that he must have been thinking about something very important...

"Simba, what is it?" Nala asked, padding over to him.

"I don't know," Simba replied, looking around. "I thought I heard someone. But it's so quiet around here... I can't hear anything else."

"All I see is trees," Haiba said. He then smiled. "Very *hot* trees, too. Look at the thin branches on that one!"

"Shut up, Haiba," Nala snapped. "I think Simba's on to something important. You don't think there might be anyone magical living in the *trees*, do you?"

"No." Simba shook his head. "I just heard... something. That's never a good thing. I feel like something very bad is going to happen."

"I *a/ways* have that feeling," Haiba confessed. His eyes then lit up. "Hey! I have something in common with myself! We both feel the same way! I can see the romantic possibilities now... They're endless!"

"Haiba, you can't date yourself," Nala told him. "It's impossible."

"Oh, yeah?" Haiba challenged. "Let me try." He then fell to the ground, his mouth twisting around in agony.

Simba and Nala stared at him, utterly stunned. "What is he *doing*?" Nala exclaimed.

"I'm trying to kiss myself," Haiba said. It looked like he was trying to attack himself with his own tongue...

"You're really not helping," Simba said, looking quite apprehensive to continue on with the journey. He wanted to find out the source of that noise first. "Now, I'm sure we've been in this part of the jungle before. I'm trying to remember where..."

Simba traipsed off, closely followed by Nala. Haiba hit the ground in frustration, realising that he was unable to interact romantically with himself. "Wait for me! I'm coming!" He stumbled after them.

"We *have* been here before," Nala said, suddenly remembering. "Recently, in fact."

"All of the jungle looks the same to me," Haiba said. "Why would this part stand out from all the rest?"

"Well—" Simba began, but he soon stopped when they arrived at an all too familiar location.

A body was lying on the ground in front of them. Its eyes had been gouged out, just one of them hanging limply from a socket by a thin line of muscle and sinew. Chunks of flesh were missing from the gory corpse, most likely pecked away by hungry buzzards. The foul odour of blood and rotting flesh invaded their nostrils. It wasn't until they saw the blood-stained golden staff sticking out of its chest that they realised who it was.

They were staring at the body of Tojo.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6: The Corpse

Chapter Six: The Corpse

"Oh, my gosh!" Nala retched as she felt herself about to vomit. She turned her head, and the nausea passed. "That is the most... disgusting thing I've ever seen."

Haiba covered his eyes with both forepaws, trying to block out the sight. "Tell me when it's gone. Oh, man—it'll take five hundred years to wash out this memory..."

But Simba's eyes were wide open. He couldn't help but stare, entranced, at Tojo's corpse. It was one of those things that someone like him just couldn't look away from. He had to observe it.

You did this, Simba told himself, as he gazed at Tojo's withering corpse. *You killed him. It's all your fault. If you'd never met Hago, then Tojo would still be here today. He would still be alive—with Tama. You killed him. You killed him. You killed him...*

Nala stared down at the ground. She didn't want to look at Tojo's body ever again. Not in this state. It hadn't looked so bad the previous time... The fact that buzzards had now pecked at it made things much more horrific. "Can we please get out of here? This is too much for me to handle."

"Good idea," Haiba said, nodding as he walked away. He hid behind a tree, allowing himself to see once more. "Well, this is a relatively safe spot."

Simba finally turned away from Tojo's body, his heart filled with grief and regret. He felt responsible for this. There was still an element of him that thought that Tama was indeed right about them being monsters. Tojo was just the latest in a long series of deaths...

And so many more would follow.

"Come on, Simba." Nala tugged him away, wanting to get out of here as fast as possible. "I don't like it around here. Not with... with *him*." She still looked traumatised at the sight of Tojo's mangled body.

"He has a name," Simba said coldly. "His name was Tojo. We deserve to see him in this state. We're the ones that caused it."

"What?" Nala stared at him in disbelief. "Simba, what are you talking about? We had nothing to do with—"

"No, but don't you see?" Simba interrupted, finally allowing his feelings to escape. "We caused this. If we never went out that day—if we never met Hago—then Tojo would still be here."

"Simba, don't be stupid," Nala said. "It's not our fault."

"Yes, it is," Simba declared. "We're the monsters. Everywhere we go, everyone dies all around us. It's all just a game of survival for us. All we care about is ourselves. All we want is to survive. We never even stop for a second and think about anyone else. We act like we're the most important animals on earth."

"That's not true, Simba," Nala told him, "and you know it. We've saved hundreds of animals. *Thousands*, I'd bet. Everything else is... Well, it's just bad luck. There are loads of deaths every single day. It's not like we're attracted to danger."

"*Aren't* we?" Simba said, thoroughly unconvinced as he brushed past her. "Let's just get out of here. I feel sick already."

Nala just stood there, watching as Simba disappeared into the distance. Haiba walked past her, whispering in her ear.

"I sense the beginning of something very depressing," he said.

"You're not the only one," Nala said quietly. There was a strangely ominous feeling floating around inside of her. Like a sixth sense. She felt as though things were finally coming to a close.

She felt like the end was near.

"Wait a minute..." Haiba stopped, peering hard into the horizon. "Where the heck did Simba go?"

Simba kept on walking ahead, depression slowly beginning to consume him once more. He looked around, just about able to see the grey clouds hanging dully in the sky. It felt windy, too. The weather had been more than unusual in recent times—particularly odd considering that it was the middle of the summer.

Things have to change, Simba told himself, already feeling guilty enough about letting Tojo come to harm. He could only imagine how much Tama must hate them all right now... *You have to stop being so selfish. You only think about yourself. Isn't it about time that you concerned yourself with others for once? What would your father think if he saw you —?*

"Sssimba..."

A hissing voice penetrated through Simba's thoughts.

Whoosh!

"There was that noise again," Simba whispered to himself. "Guys!" He looked around, but couldn't see Nala or Haiba anywhere. He was *sure* that they were right behind him... weren't they? "Who's there?"

"No one important. Just a friend that'ssss willing to help you," replied the sinister voice.

Simba felt something slither behind his back. He shivered slightly at the feel, knowing that whatever was behind him, it wasn't good. "Who are you?" He didn't want to admit it, but he didn't exactly feel like turning around. There could be anything behind him... A monster. A demon. Something from the pits of hell itself.

"Turn around, Sssimba," commanded the voice. "And face your desstiny."

Unable to resist any longer, Simba turned around—

—and found Nyoka staring back at him.

"What are you?" Simba asked, staring at the snake in horror. He didn't know much about snakes. Except that they weren't to be trusted. "What do you want?"

"My name issss Nyoka," said the snake, "and I know exactly what you need, Sssimba."

Great. Another bad guy who wants to take advantage of my depression, Simba thought glumly. *I can't wait to see how this turns out.*

"You need... love," Nyoka told him. "You misssss your parentssss. It'ssss jussst... ssssaddening, isn't it?"

"Yep," Simba agreed. He then shook his head. "But I'm not bringing them back. No matter what you say."

"Now, now, Sssimba," hissed the serpent, curling himself around Simba's neck so their faces were almost touching. "You wouldn't say anything rasssh, now, would you? You could have anything you want... Don't you want my help?"

"No," Simba said bluntly. "I don't particularly care what you can offer. You're evil. And how do you know my name?"

"Me? Evil?" Nyoka almost looked offended. "I know my appearance may be deceiving, but I am ssssomeone who you can trussst."

"Yeah, right," Simba laughed. "I think I know better than to trust someone like you. You're crazy!"

"Trussst in me, Simba," Nyoka said. "I can make all of your dreamsss come true. Isssn't that what everybody wantsss?"

Simba could only stare bemusedly at the serpent, wondering why such an evil character would want to take advantage of him in this way. What could he possibly gain from it? He clearly had some sort of hidden agenda... Simba's interest was certainly piqued. He wished to know more about him.

"So who are you, then?" Simba questioned, intrigued. "Why are you so interested in granting other animals' wishes?"

Nyoka affected a heartbroken look. "Oh, my kind are sssso very mean," he groaned. "They're heartlesssss and cruel. All they want isss to rip others apart—and alssso eat them in the processss."

Simba suddenly found himself remembering the sight of Tojo's rotting corpse. He wondered if—along with the buzzards—snakes had taken a bite out of his dead flesh, too. It was a thought that churned his stomach...

"I hate my kind, Sssimba," Nyoka said. "And they've always been jealoussss of my good nature. And my gift."

"Your gift?" Simba remembered that the Hermit of Hekima said that he had 'the gift'. Were they related, somehow? "What do you mean by that?"

"I can read mindssss," Nyoka told him, confirming Simba's suspicions. The Hermit of Hekima had the very same power.

So that is how he knew my name! Simba thought to himself. *I should ask the Hermit of Hekima if they know each other...*

"I can ssssee into the soulsss of otherssss," Nyoka informed him. "And I can grant their wissshesss, too. All it takesss issss one little bite."

"Bite?" Simba said, puzzled. "Bite what?"

"Well..." Nyoka reached up to a nearby branch, and plucked a shiny red apple from out of nowhere. He thrust it into Simba's mouth. "You could bite into thisss apple, and it would instantly bring back both your home and your loving parentssss. It issss your dream, correct?"

"Why are you doing this?" Simba asked, spitting out the apple and glaring intently at the serpent. He seriously doubted that a snake would suddenly decide to turn against his kind and pursue a lifetime of helping others with their dreams.

"Becaussse the world issss a grim place, Sssimba," Nyoka said. "Granted, everyone hasss wissshess—but who hasss their wissshess granted? I am offering you the greatessst opportunity. Why don't you take it up?"

"Because I don't trust you," Simba said. "No matter what you say. I bet you've tricked a lot of animals into biting that apple—and I bet something horrible has happened to *all* of them. No. I don't trust you, Nyoka. And I never will."

"Oh, dear." An angry look suddenly crossed the evil serpent's face. "If you won't do things the easssy way, then you'll have to do them the hard way."

His eyes began to glow, and Simba could only stare as Nyoka began to use his hypnosis powers...

"Trussst in me, Sssimba," the snake hissed. "Trussst in me..."

AN: Oh, that was mean of me to throw Tojo's corpse in there for the cubs to find. I'm sure the memory of his death is still lingering on in your minds. But what does Nyoka want? It has to have something to do with that apple. He sure is a mysterious character... Find out what his evil plan is tomorrow. See you then!

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: Not the Good Guy

AN: This is it, folks. The final chapter. Two crucial things will happen by the end of it. More twists and turns, as you can guess. But then what do you expect from the final series? Happy fluffy bunnies? No! Of course not! It's time for some drama!

Chapter Seven: Not the Good Guy

Simba looked away from Nyoka's hypnotic eyes, slapping him across the face with a paw. The snake recoiled in pain, wincing. "Ow... my sinussesss," he moaned. "You will pay for your insolence, Sssimba..."

"Shut up!" Simba snapped. "I've been hypnotised a bazillion times before in my life, and I'm sick of it! I won't let it happen this time! Whatever your plan is, Nyoka, I don't want to be a part of it!"

"You are the only one who can make the connection," Nyoka told him, sounding almost desperate now. It confused Simba to no end. This snake seemed so hostile and threatening towards him—but it didn't seem like he was planning on killing him anytime soon. He was needed for something... Something that this serpent didn't want him to know about. "You are the most important life form in this jungle."

"The most important life form in the jungle?" Simba repeated, seriously doubting that. "Okay. Cool. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Eat the apple," Nyoka said, "and find out."

Simba rolled his eyes, turning around and walking away. "I really don't have time for this," he sighed. "I'm outta here."

"You will ssstay here, Sssimba," Nyoka hissed. "Or you will die. I can ssstrike with my fangssss right now and finisssh you for good."

"Oh, so you *will* kill me?" Simba asked, turning back around to face him. "Because, for some reason, I don't think so. You need me. If I die, then your plan is ruined. Am I right?"

Anger descended upon Nyoka's face, his eyes burning into Simba's. "You know nothing, cub," he snarled. "There issss darknessss ssswimming all around you. And yet you cannot sssee it. The end is near for you, Sssimba."

Simba just stared at the snake, narrowing his eyes in curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"What doesss it matter?" replied Nyoka. "Eat the apple, and allow your wildessst dreamssss to come true. Why keep on living in thissss disssmal life? Everything could go back to the way it wassss before."

"I was offered that before," Simba told him, "and everything went wrong. I won't make the same mistake again."

"Very well," said Nyoka. "If you won't accept my offer, and you won't sssuccumb to my hypnosiss, then I will make you eat the apple *by force*."

Nyoka suddenly lashed out without warning, taking Simba by surprise. He grunted in pain as the snake wrapped his long tail around him, constricting him of any movement. He struggled and strained, but couldn't break free. The snake had him trapped. If he wanted to, he could keep him there for ever.

"Let... let me go!" Simba said, kicking and shoving to try and escape. But it was no use. Nyoka seemed to tighten around Simba the more he resisted, making things even worse for the cub. "What are you doing?"

"Thissss isss the only way, Sssimba," Nyoka said sinisterly, reaching down towards the ground and picking up the apple with his mouth. He held it in front of Simba's face. The cub's eyes widened in horror.

"No!" Simba tried to move his head, but he couldn't. The horrible serpent had restricted him of all movement. "Please! Don't!" He dreaded to think what might happen if he swallowed this apple. The results could be catastrophic...

The snake darted forward, shoving the apple right into Simba's mouth. "Now, digessst the apple, Sssimba... *digessst it...*"

Simba kept the apple in his mouth, knowing that if he so much as took a bite out of it, then he would be doomed. *Don't swallow it,* he chanted. *Don't swallow it. Don't swallow it. Don't swallow it...*

"Eat it..." Nyoka commanded, his eyes glowing once more in an attempt to control Simba. "*Eat it...*"

Simba shut his eyes as tightly as he possibly could. *Never*, he thought. *Never, never, never, never, never...*

"Come on, you little—"

Nyoka was cut off as a rock bounced off the back of his head. He shrieked in pain, releasing Simba from his grip and sending him falling to the ground. "Who daresss to harm myskull?"

Sarafina was revealed standing behind a bush, staring down the snake courageously. "I do," she proclaimed. "Don't even *think* about trying to tempt him like you did with me."

"You have no businesssss being here, Sssarafina," Nyoka said. "Just becausssse you essssaped me does not give you the right to try and ssstop me. Besides, you aren't the right sssoul I need for my plan."

"I've had enough of your mysteriousness," said Simba. "Now, tell me what your plan is before I tear you to shreds. Don't think I won't do it. I'll do whatever's necessary to survive out here."

"Oh, how brave," Nyoka taunted. "I sssense great anger and fear in you, Sssimba. Nevertheless, you are the sssingle most important sssoul in this jungle. And that issss why I need you. Once you ssswallow that apple, I will rule thisss jungle and everyone in it."

"How?" Simba demanded.

"It will not wasssste my time explaining it to you," Nyoka replied. "There are dark forcesss at work around here. Firsssst there wassss that spell around the Pride Lands. Itssss magic is sssseeping through into thissss jungle. I wisssh to take advantage of that. I could create my own new spell with my powerssss of temptation. One that will ensssslave every sssingle being in thissss jungle."

"So you know about the spell surrounding the Pride Lands?" Simba asked.

"Many magical animalssss sssuch as myself know of it," Nyoka said. "We do not underssstand it, but we know of it. It issss ssssaid to be the dark work of the mosssst horrifying being you can possssibly imagine."

"So you're going to capitalise on someone else's evil?" Sarafina asked, staring at the snake in disbelief. "That's... that's horrible."

"Evil isss the way of the world," Nyoka said simply. "It issss a bussssinesss to me. I want power—jussst like any of you."

"But we don't want power," Simba protested. "We just want to survive."

"I wisssh to sssurvive, as well," Nyoka said. "We are the sssame. We fight and kill and maim in order to live. Thissss is why you should assssisst me."

"We will never help you," Sarafina declared. "You're evil."

"You are not sssso noble yourssselfs," Nyoka said. "I sssense the doubt in young Ssssimba here. He thinkssss of himssself as a bad animal. And he issss. Thisss is why he should join my cause."

"Why me?" Simba asked. "I can't be the most important animal in the jungle. There are thousands of them out there!"

"You are the centre of the disssurbance," Nyoka revealed. "The magic issss connected to you, in some way. I could not trace it at firssst. I tried with other lionssss and lionesssssss—including Sssarafina over there—until I found you. You are the *exact* centre of all thisss energy. Once you consssume the apple, I will use your corpsse to perform a spell that will ssssurround the jungle."

"You want to create a copy of the Pride Lands spell?" Sarafina concluded. "Using Simba?"

The evil serpent nodded. "Yessss!" he exclaimed. "Think of the power! The glory! I shall be invincible! I can control everything!"

"You're insane," Simba said. "And you can think again if you believe I'm going to swallow that apple."

"You cannot defeat me, Sssimba," Nyoka hissed, slithering across the ground, heading right towards him. "If you do not sssubmit, then I will kill your friendssss. I will kill Nala. I will kill Haiba. I will kill Zazu. Every ssssingle thing that you hold dear, I shall desstroy. Unlessss you eat that apple."

"Don't do it, Simba," Sarafina said. "He tried to tempt me, and it almost worked. But you can't let him get to you."

Simba's face showed nothing but determination, his eyes fixated on the ground below. "I've been threatened before," he said coldly. "Loads of times. It won't work." He then raised his head, so he was looking right at Nyoka. "But you're right. I'm not the good guy anymore."

He paused for a moment, glancing aside. "But I'm not the bad guy, either. I'll do what I have to."

The snake let out another one of his evil chuckles. "Are you going to kill me, Sssimba?" he challenged. "You're too much of a coward to kill a lowly little sssnake ssssuch as mysself."

Simba didn't respond.

Nyoka then frowned, realising that Simba was deadly serious.

He would do anything to survive.

And that included murder.

"Very well," Nyoka said. "Then you will die, Sssimba."

The serpent lashed out with his fangs, going right for Simba's throat—
—and found himself impaled right through the midsection.

The snake looked down, stunned, at the sharp stick Simba was holding in his paw. It had penetrated right through his stomach and was poking out of his back. All he could do now was stare into the cub's fiery auburn eyes.

The eyes of a killer.

"I warned you," Simba said. He had taken the opportunity to grab the stick while the snake was gloating about his plans. He was more than willing to kill him, if need be. Anything to keep on living. "I warned you."

Nyoka choked once, twice—

—and then died.

The snake fell to the ground in a tangled heap. Simba walked away from the bleeding corpse without looking back once. "Come on," he said to Sarafina. "Let's get out of here."

Sarafina slowly sauntered after him, looking equally as horrified as Nyoka at Simba's actions.

"Where the heck did you disappear to?" Nala asked, jumping up from her spot by the riverside when she saw Simba and Sarafina enter the resort later that evening. "And, Mom, what are *you* doing with him?"

"Well—" Simba began.

"Wait," Nala interrupted, looking him over. "Why do you have blood all over your paw." She lifted up one of Simba's paws—the one in which he had held the sharpened stick—to reveal that it was smothered with blood from killing Nyoka.

"I had a little problem with a snake," Simba said. He had an odd smile on his face as he said this. As if he had just achieved a great victory... "It's all taken care of."

"Oh." Nala didn't really know how to answer that. "Well... okay. But why were you with him, Mom?"

Sarafina looked at Simba, and Simba looked back at her. He was giving her this hard stare. It was sort of... *threatening*, in a way. It scared her. If he could kill Nyoka in cold blood, then there was no telling what he might do to anyone else...

She thought it was best to lie about why she had been accompanying him. "I was just... going on a walk," she told her daughter. "And I ran into Simba on the way back."

"Well, it's good that you're back," Nala said. "We were beginning to get worried about you."

"Don't worry," Simba said, still smiling. "I'll be fine. *Just fine*..."

"Girls, please, stop fighting over me," Haiba said, grinning. "Surely we can share?"

He shook his head, striding away from the two trees. "Well, if you're going to keep arguing, then I just won't bother." He sighed. "What's a cub gotta do to get some romance around here?"

Haiba sat beside a small river, swishing around the water with a paw. He was situated around the outskirts of the resort, having decided to spend some time alone. "Oh, I hate it here..."

He had to admit that he was pretty sick of the jungle by now. The sight of the Pride Lands or the Grand Lands would be most welcomed by him. He missed both places. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd seen his mother...

"You're not the only one who hates it here," said another voice.

Haiba turned his head to the side to see Tama, sitting a few feet away from him. "Tama? How did *you* get here?"

"How do you think?" Tama replied, shuffling over so she was sitting right beside him. "I *walked*. I got sick of that hammock."

"You should be resting," Haiba said. "You've just come out of quite a big ordeal."

"I don't need rest," Tama said bluntly. "I want to keep on going. Otherwise I'll just be stuck moping around for ever."

"Well... that's good, I suppose," Haiba said. Although he still doubted that Tama was completely stable... If he were in her place, he may very well have gone insane. To lose who you cared about the most... Well, it was just unthinkable. "Yeah. Real good."

Tama shrugged. "You look pretty lonely, too," she noticed.

"I'm just sick of hanging around here," Haiba confessed. "It gets pretty dull. You've seen one tree, you've seen 'em all. At least the Pride Lands had some variety. Some pretty cute variety, too. There was this flower called Daisy that I was particularly fond of..."

"So... you could say we're pretty similar," Tama concluded, looking up at him. "We... connect, in a way. You've lost things. I've lost them, too."

Haiba shrugged. "I guess." He looked down at the river, staring at his reflection. Did he always look that miserable? He hadn't noticed...

"Haiba?" Tama said.

"What?" Haiba asked.

And she kissed him.

She didn't stop as they fell to the ground. Haiba couldn't resist. And he didn't particularly want to, either.

Tama and Haiba lay there, by the river, kissing each other for what seemed like for ever. He knew that in the future, this was going to spell nothing but disaster for him. It couldn't be right...

But at the moment, he just didn't care.

The End

AN: Oh, dear, dear, dear. So Simba's delving more and more into the dark side after killing Nyoka in cold blood. Looks like he's not so in control of his dark side as he thought. Kill or be killed. Plus Haiba and Tama are now engaging in some sort of romantic affair. She really has lost it after Tojo's death... More twists and turns. I tried to warn you. Oh, well. See you soon with the next story.

NEXT TIME: Simba, Nala and Haiba discover a lost underground world of prehistoric monsters...